

VD at the Movies: PHS Films of the 1930s and 1940s

JOHN PARASCANDOLA, PHD

In 1942, Dr. James A. Dolce of the United States Public Health Service (PHS), wrote to a colleague:

“We feel very strongly that motion picture films are a most important medium for health education. Well-written and produced films not only command large audiences, but, as you know, actually instill more information into observers than does any other teaching aid.”

Among the motion pictures that figured prominently in the health education efforts of the PHS in the 1940s were films on venereal disease (VD). These films formed an important part of the PHS campaign against VD which had been inaugurated by Thomas Parran soon after he became PHS Surgeon General in 1936, and which intensified after the outbreak of war in Europe.

Neither the involvement of the PHS with venereal disease nor the use of films to educate the public about syphilis and gonorrhea were new. The PHS had been operating a VD program since the First World War, when concern over the number of Army recruits infected with syphilis or gonorrhea led Congress to enact a law which created a Venereal Disease Division in the PHS.

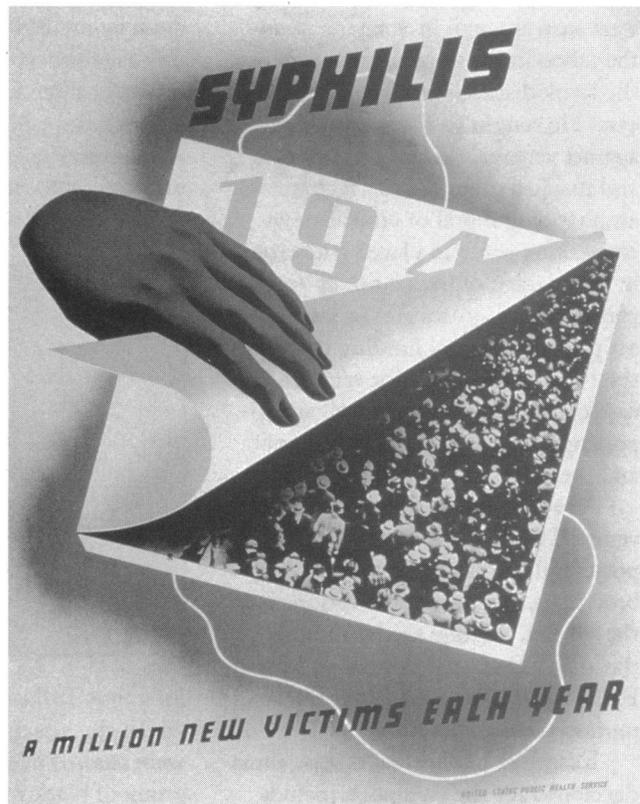
The first film ever produced by the U.S. government, “Fit to Fight,” was aimed at warning American troops about the dangers of venereal disease. Produced during World War I by the

Commission on Training Camp Activities, it followed the experiences of five draftees, two of whom contract syphilis after having sex with a prostitute. After the war, the title was changed to “Fit to Win,” but the film soon fell into disfavor. Socially conservative groups objected to its message that if you cannot be moral at least be careful—use chemical prophylaxis—and the New York State Board of Censors declared it obscene in 1919.

In 1922, Johns Hopkins psychologists Karl Lashley and John B. Watson (who later achieved fame as the “father” of Behaviorism) published a study on the effectiveness of “Fit to Win” as a tool in the effort to control venereal disease. The Hopkins researchers concluded from their study that the film was very effective in conveying information about venereal disease to the audience, but that there was no evidence that behavior was significantly modified. They stated, for example that:

“The picture does not reduce the exposure rate of men who see it or make them more careful in the use of prophylaxis, except possibly for a few days.”

The Lashley-Watson study, however, failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the public health community for the use of films as educational tools in the



campaign against VD.

With the end of the war, Congress lost interest in the venereal disease problem and funding for this purpose declined dramatically. Thomas Parran later commented:

“Congress apparently thought the spirochetes of syphilis were demobilized with the army. More accurately, no further thought whatever was given to syphilis and the first national public health effort came to an untimely end.”

When Parran was appointed Surgeon General of the PHS in 1936, he wasted no time in relaunching the national campaign against venereal disease. Parran had served as chief of the PHS Venereal Disease Division earlier in his career and had never lost interest in the subject.

Parran’s popular articles and books

were instrumental in breaking down the taboo in the popular press against the frank discussion of venereal disease. He sought to focus the battle against venereal disease on scientific and medical grounds, rather than emphasizing moral or ethical views concerning sex, and played a key role in the passage of the National Venereal Disease Control Act in 1938. The act provided federal funding through the PHS to the states for venereal disease control programs, as well as supporting research into the treatment and prevention of venereal disease.

As a part of its efforts to combat venereal disease, the PHS issued posters (illustrating this article), brochures, and other publications on the subject. Among the weapons in the anti-VD arsenal developed by the PHS in the 1930s and 1940s were motion picture films.

Examples of venereal disease films developed for the campaign include "Three Counties Against Syphilis," produced for the PHS by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1939, and "Know for Sure," produced for the PHS by the Research Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1941. "Three Counties Against Syphilis" depicted the work

done by the PHS trailer clinic in the fight against syphilis among rural blacks in three Georgia counties. Ironically, at the same time that the PHS was sponsoring this laudable program to help control the disease, it was also conducting the unethical and now

"Know for Sure" was a sexual hygiene film aimed at male audiences.

infamous Tuskegee experiment in which the effects of untreated syphilis were studied over many years in a group of black males.

"Know for Sure" was a sexual hygiene film aimed at male audiences, especially workers, and provided information on the recognition of early symptoms of syphilis and on the importance of preventive measures against the disease. A later version of this film, deleting the scenes with

explicit depictions of male sex organs and information about the use of condoms, was produced for mixed gender audiences.

When Warner Brothers produced the 1940 feature film "Dr Ehrlich's Magic Bullet," starring Edward G. Robinson as the German scientist who discovered a cure for syphilis, the PHS saw an opportunity to make use of this popular film in its campaign against venereal disease. In the summer of 1943, the PHS contracted with Warner Brothers for the studio to produce a revised version of "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet" for PHS use. The adapted version of the film was thirty minutes in length, and focused on the portion of the story that dealt with Ehrlich's discovery of Salvarsan and its use against syphilis. No new footage was shot for the PHS version, but where necessary titles were inserted providing the connecting links between scenes. The PHS version of the film was given the title "Magic Bullets."

Raymond Vonderlehr of the Venereal Disease Division was convinced that the shortened version of the Ehrlich film would be "one of the most effective weapons in our educational armament." Since the United States was immersed in the Second

"I thought a thing like that could never happen to me"

1,500,000 Americans have SYPHILIS or GONORRHEA and don't know it

ASK YOUR DOCTOR or CALL your HEALTH DEPARTMENT FOR A CHECKUP



World War when "Magic Bullets" was produced, the Office of War Information became a major distributor of the film. As in the First World War, venereal disease was viewed as a threat to American's fighting ability, and the film was described as "a definite aid in the war effort—fitting into the Public Health Service's national education and information program on VD."

Films dealing with venereal disease and intended for release through theatrical channels still remained controversial, and Warner Brothers had had to obtain an exemption from the motion picture production code's policy against films dealing with the subject when they produced "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet." The production code had forced alterations of scripts of some films to delete any reference to venereal disease. For example, when Sidney Kingsley's 1936 play "Dead End" was made into a film, the story was changed to substitute tuberculosis

for syphilis as the disease suffered by one of the characters, a prostitute. Serious objections were raised by the Legion of Decency to a 1944 VD film entitled "To the People of the United States," produced by Walter Wenger of Universal Studios under contract with the California State Department of Health with PHS cooperation. The filmed featured major Hollywood stars such as Jean Hersholt and Robert Mitchum. The Legion was concerned that the film, although dignified and restrained in its treatment of the subject, failed to stress the fact that promiscuity was the principal cause for the spread of venereal disease. The motion picture production code policy against VD as a suitable subject for entertainment films was also cited by the Legion, but the code did not apply to films produced or sponsored by federal or state governments. Although not objecting to showings of the film by private groups, the Legion was opposed to its use in commercial theaters. Fearful that the controversy surrounding the film might jeopardize other public health programs, the PHS decided not to become the national distributor for the film.

The PHS was also concerned about the negative effect that "exploitation" films posing as sex edu-

cation films might have on the venereal disease campaign. One such film, "Mom and Dad" (1944), which was widely shown in commercial theaters in the 1940s, told the story of a young unmarried woman who becomes pregnant, and included clinical photographs of patients with VD and scenes depicting the birth of a baby. Although promoted under the guise of education, the film was clearly designed to make money by exploiting the public's curiosity about "forbidden" subjects. PHS officials were particularly upset about the use of PHS photographs in the film and the unauthorized display of the PHS seal in the credits. They even contemplated taking legal action against the producers of the film, but decided against it.

In addition to the titles previously mentioned, the PHS produced or collaborated on a variety of other venereal disease films, aimed at both the lay and professional audiences in this period. They included "Gonorrhea" (1943), a color film intended to provide physicians with information about the diagnosis and treatment of the disease, and "Penicillin and Venereal Disease" (1947), designed to acquaint health professionals with the effectiveness of penicillin (then a new "wonder drug") against VD. These films played a significant role in the wartime and postwar campaigns against venereal disease.

Although it is difficult to know how well they fulfilled their objectives, PHS officials were convinced that films were effective tools in the effort to control VD. Today, films are still an educational tool of choice for health messages.

Dr. Parascandola is PHS Historian.

Tearsheet requests to PHS Historian, 18-23 Parklawn Bldg., 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857; tel. 301-443-5363; fax 301-443-4193.